

# Early Choral Concerts 1935–1945

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Some years ago, while scavenging the ‘Local History’ section of the well-loved second-hand bookshop in Sharrow Vale Road, I came across a brochure celebrating *The First Ten Years* of the Sheffield Philharmonic Society. It was advertising the concerts for the 1945–46 season, and had a number of articles about various aspects of the first ten years of the Society’s history. At £2 it seemed a snip. Now, as the reopening of the refurbished City Hall approaches, I realise that this document – very few of which can have survived – is of quite wide general interest, and I would like to share what it has to say about choral music with fellow Sheffield Philharmonic Chorus members.

An opening article by the Professor of Music at the University (F.H. Shera) includes a paragraph about the chorus:

In 1937, by a friendly agreement between the two Committees, the Sheffield Musical Union [chorus] merged with the [Sheffield Philharmonic] Society; an arrangement which had the blessing of the Union’s founder, the late Sir Henry Coward. Today the Philharmonic Chorus is a live and enthusiastic body of nearly 350 singers . . . and it is a matter for congratulation among singers and hearers alike that the Society’s circumstances enable its choral performances to be presented with proper advantages, that is, with the participation of a first-rate orchestra, and after thorough rehearsal of chorus and orchestra together; things which were rare, if not unknown, in bygone days . . . Good as it is, it will be still better when the somewhat slender ranks of tenors and basses are reinforced by young men returning from the stern tasks of war.

Altogether, in ten years to June 1945, 221 concerts were given – of which 20 (9%) were choral concerts. The rest were either symphony concerts (59%), or chamber music recitals (32%). In the first years either 2 or 3 choral concerts were presented each year. But the war (and the destruction wrought on the city by enemy air raids) meant that only one choral concert took place in 1939–40, and none at all between 1940 and 1943. Then a sudden burst of cultural activity produced 5 choral concerts in 1943–44, and 4 in 1944–45.

The brochure contains a complete listing of all the works performed in the years 1935–1945. Inevitably, *Messiah* features most frequently (5 performances). But strangely many items which we might consider to be central to the classical choral repertory are absent: Bach is only represented by two cantatas; there is no Beethoven, Schubert, Mendelssohn or Brahms. However, there is a reasonable balance of what would at the

time have been ‘new’ works: Elgar’s *Spirit of England* (first performed in 1917); Holst’s *Hymn of Jesus* (1917); Lambert’s *Rio Grande* (1928); and Vaughan Williams’s *Five Tudor Portraits* (1936). Opera has its place in programmes too: Borodin (*Prince Igor*), Moussorgsky (*Boris Godunov*), Verdi (*Aida*), and Wagner (*Tannhäuser*, *Die Meistersinger*, and *Parsifal*) all feature.

The complete choral list is:

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|------------------|--|
| Bach             | Cantatas <i>Ein’ feste Burg</i> and <i>Nun ist das Heil</i>  |
| Berlioz          | <i>Te Deum</i> and <i>L’Enfance du Christ</i> (part ii – the Flight into Egypt)                                |
| Borodin          | <i>Prince Igor</i> (Polovstian Dances)   |
| Debussy          | <i>Sirènes</i> (Three Nocturnes)   |
| Dvorák           | <i>Stabat mater</i>  |
| Elgar            | <i>Spirit of England</i>   |
| Grainger         | <i>The Merry Wedding</i>   |
| Handel           | <i>Acis and Galatea</i> , <i>The King shall Rejoice</i> (Coronation Anthem) and <i>Messiah</i> (5)             |
| Haydn            | <i>The Creation</i>  |
| Holst            | <i>Hymn of Jesus</i>   |
| Lambert          | <i>The Rio Grande</i>  |
| Moussorgsky      | <i>Boris Godunov</i> (Coronation Scene)  |
| Mozart           | <i>Requiem Mass</i>  |
| Parry            | <i>Ode on the Nativity</i>   |
| Pergolesi        | <i>Stabat Mater</i>  |
| Rachmaninoff     | <i>Der Frühling</i> (Spring)   |
| Vaughan Williams | <i>Five Tudor Portraits</i> and <i>Towards the Unknown Region</i>  |
| Verdi            | <i>Requiem</i> and <i>Aida</i> (Acts i & ii)   |
| Wagner           | <i>Tannhäuser</i> (Act iii), <i>Die Meistersinger</i> (excerpts from Act iii), and <i>Parsifal</i> (excerpts). |

If you had wanted to buy a ticket for any of these concerts in 1945, you could have done so at Wilson Pecks in Fargate; it would have cost you between 2/6 and 7/6.